



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Mother Lode Field Office
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'Inimim Forest projects FY 10 (CA-180-10-13) Finding of No Significant Impact March 2010

It is my determination that this decision will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Anticipated impacts are within the range of impacts addressed by the Sierra Resource Management Plan (RMP). Thus, the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not necessary and will not be prepared. This conclusion is based on my consideration of CEQ's following criteria for significance (40 CFR §1508.27), regarding the context and intensity of the impacts described in the EA and based on my understanding of the project:

1) Impacts can be both beneficial and adverse and a significant effect may exist regardless of the perceived balance of effects. Negative impacts would be short-term and small. These impacts include vegetation removal (no special status) and temporary noise and dust when the cut vegetation is treated. In the long run, the projects would be beneficial to forest and meadow health. The impacts are not significant. The beneficial impacts far outweigh the negative impacts which are negligible.

2) The degree of the impact on public health or safety. No aspects of the proposed action have been identified as having the potential to significantly and adversely impact public health or safety. In fact, the project is designed to enhance public health by reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area. The general area is located within public lands known as the 'Inimim Forest. The project area is not within an ACEC nor does it contain any unique characteristics. These are forestlands which, under approved land-use plans, BLM manages jointly with local residents.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial effects. No anticipated effects have been identified that are scientifically controversial. As a factor for determining within the meaning of 40 C.F.R. § 1508.27(b)(4) whether or not to prepare a detailed environmental impact statement, "controversy" is not equated with "the existence of opposition to a use." *Northwest Environmental Defense Center v. Bonneville Power Administration*, 117 F.3d 1520, 1536 (9th Cir. 1997). "The term 'highly controversial' refers to instances in which 'a substantial dispute exists as to the size, nature, or effect of the major federal action rather than the mere existence of opposition to a use.'" *Hells Canyon Preservation Council v. Jacoby*, 9 F.Supp.2d 1216, 1242 (D. Or. 1998).

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The analysis does not show that the proposed action would involve any unique or unknown risks.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.* The proposed action is not precedent setting.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.* No significant site specific or cumulative impacts have been identified. The proposed action is consistent with the Sierra RMP.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect National Historic Register listed or eligible to be listed sites or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources.* The proposed action would not adversely affect cultural properties listed on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect ESA listed species or critical habitat.* No ESA listed species (or their habitat) are known to occur in the area potentially affected by the proposed action.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of environmental protection law or requirements.* There is no indication that the proposed action will result in actions that will threaten such a violation.

William S. Haigh
Field Manager,
Mother Lode Field Office

Date



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EA Number: CA-180-10-13

Proposed Action: 'Inimim Forest projects FY 10

Location: MDBM, T 17 N, R 9 E, sections 7 and 8. Refer to the map attached

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action

The Yuba Watershed Institute (represented by Bob Erikson and Daniel Nicholson) is asking the Mother Lode Field Office (BLM) for permission to do various projects on a BLM-administered parcel on San Juan Ridge, Nevada County. The parcel is one of several public land parcels that comprise the 'Inimim Forest. The proposed projects would involve education, research, fuels reduction, and forest management work, all in accordance with the 'Inimim Forest Management Plan adopted by BLM in 1995. The projects are necessary to continue to implement the management practices (pages 9-14) laid out in this community-based plan. The primary goal of the plan was for BLM, Yuba Watershed Institute, and other local residents to jointly manage the BLM-administered lands known as the 'Inimim Forest in a way that fosters the development of a late seral, or old growth, forest.

1.2 Conformance with Applicable Land Use Plans

The proposed projects are consistent with the 'Inimim Forest Management Plan adopted by BLM in 1995. BLM decided to continue to carry out the 'Inimim Forest Management Plan as part of its master plan for public land management (see the Record of Decision for the Sierra Resource Management Plan) in 2008.

2.0 Proposed Action and Alternatives

2.1 Proposed Action

Five projects have been proposed by the Yuba Watershed Institute (YWI). The projects are described as follows:

1. YWI would like to create a path for members of the public to safely walk through the woods, so they can learn about fire history/tree stand dynamics in the 'Inimim Forest. YWI would use the path for guided interpretive walks. A BLM-sponsored AmeriCorps crew would likely be involved in the creating the proposed path. Crewmembers would use hand tools to clear the path. They would cut only understory brush and saplings (nothing larger than 4 inches in diameter) to clear a path about 3 ft wide, mainly on existing skid trails. They would remove some duff. There would be no ground disturbance.

2. As part of his ongoing fire history work, forest ecologist/researcher Don Harkin would use a chainsaw to cut a small wedge out of several incense-cedars in upper Long Ravine area to get a more accurate reading of the exact years those trees experienced the effects of wildfire. The trees are green but the wedge would come from the section that has cambium killed by the previous fires. Cutting the wedge is not likely to kill the trees and would give Harkin valuable information about fire history in the area. Harkin would share the results of his research with BLM and the 'Inimim partners.

3. A number of trees have been killed by western pine beetles along Jackass Flats Road near this road's intersection with MacNab Cypress Road. The dead trees are unstable, creating a hazardous situation. YWI would like to cut down the trees that might fall across the road. Later, the felled trees would be bucked, chipped, and moved in order to maintain the existing fuel break along the road. YWI would also like to use hand methods to treat slash in the existing shaded fuel break along this portion of the road. A BLM-sponsored AmeriCorps crew would likely be involved in implementing this proposed project. A chipper may be used to masticate cut vegetation. The chipper would be staged on Jackass Flats Road. Masticated vegetation would be broadcasted in the project area. There would be no ground disturbance.

4. YWI would like to continue the work started in October 2009 to "Save the Big Trees" in the event of wildfire. The project includes removal of understory brush and small diameter trees in the drip line of large diameter trees of mixed species (ponderosa pine, black oak, incense cedar, Douglas fir) in the upper Long Ravine area. The area contains remnant old growth forest with spotted owl roosting/nest sites found in each of the last 17 years. The goal is to not lose the "big trees" in the event of wildfire. The cut vegetation would be piled and burned in accordance with BLM's instructions. Non-fire-hazard shrubs and trees in the understory like dogwood and hazel would be left in place. A BLM-sponsored AmeriCorps crew would likely be involved in implementing this project.

5. YWI would like to continue the meadow restoration project on the Big Parcel started in 2006 and authorized under NEPA document CA-018-06-53. In 2006 YWI workers focused on removing Himalayan blackberry and other nonnative invasive species. This time they would focus removing nonnative invasive species and on cutting and removing small diameter trees (DBH < 10 inches) from around the meadow area. Aerial photo and other evidence suggest that these small diameter trees have been encroaching on the meadow over the last 50 years; shrinking the meadow size and decreasing moisture. Plant and wildlife diversity may be suffering as a result. The cut trees would be dragged to the road and put through a chipper. The chipped vegetation would be broadcasted back into the lower part of the project area. A BLM-sponsored AmeriCorps crew would likely be involved in this proposed work. It is possible that the cut vegetation would be piled around the meadow and later burned in accordance with BLM's instructions.

2.2 Project Design Features

Cultural Resources: If any previously unidentified cultural resources are discovered during project implementation, work would cease until a BLM archaeologist inspects the discovery and makes management recommendations. Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act may continue at this point. If the cultural resources are significant, the work would not proceed until appropriate measures to avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential adverse effects are taken.

Noxious Invasive Weeds: Equipment used to implement the project would be cleaned to help prevent spread of noxious invasive weeds before and after the project.

2.3 No Action

Under the no action alternative, the projects would not occur. BLM would miss an opportunity to work with its partner to manage the Animim Forest in accordance with approved land-use plans.

2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis

None

3.0 Affected Environment

Refer to pages 26-28 of the 'Inimim Forest Draft Management Plan (prepared by the Yuba Watershed Institute in 1994) for a description of the affected environment including soils, water resources, vegetation (including special status plants and invasive nonnative weeds), and wildlife.

4.0 Environmental Effects

The following critical elements have been considered for this environmental assessment, and unless specifically mentioned later in this EA, have been determined to be unaffected by the proposal: prime/unique farmlands, floodplains, hazardous waste, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness, and environmental justice.

4.1 Impacts of the Proposed Action

Air, soil, and water resources: Burning the piles could have temporary negative effects on air quality. The negative effects would occur on the day of the burning and perhaps for a short time afterward. The burning would occur under a BLM-approved burn plan. The prescription takes in account air quality and atmospheric conditions to minimize air quality and visual impacts. The proposed projects are not expected to have a negative impact on soil and water resources. No ground disturbance is proposed. There could be long-term beneficial impacts to soil and water resources. The meadow restoration work and fuels reduction in upper Long Ravine could create forest conditions that help to minimize erosion and assist in the process of soil development. Importantly, the proposed projects would reduce the likelihood of a high-severity wildfire in the immediate area of the meadow and big trees. Fire severity may be viewed along a continuum of increasing environmental impacts: low-severity fires consume mainly light fuels on the forest floor (grasses, volunteer trees, areas of downed timber and detritus, understory brush). High-severity fires, fueled by dense understory fuels and “ladder” fuels, can erupt into highly destructive crown fires which can destroy a forest. High-severity wildfire can damage soils, among other environmental resources, and lead to higher levels of erosion, which can negatively impact water resources affected by increased sediment. In sum, the proposed projects have long-term beneficial effects that appear to outweigh the short-term negative effects (smoke, haze, etc.) on air quality.

Vegetation/ invasive nonnative species: The BLM botanist analyzed the potential effects of the proposed projects on vegetation, especially special status plants. He recommends that the projects would not affect special status plants. Notably, the fuels reduction work would help to decrease the possibility that a high-severity wildfire could destroy the remnant old growth forest and damage the meadow area. The tree and weed removal in the meadow area would improve meadow health, helping to enhance diversity and protect species of interest in this area.

Wildlife: The BLM wildlife biologist analyzed the potential effects of the proposed projects on wildlife, especially special status wildlife. She recommends that the projects would not affect special status wildlife. The meadow and forest restoration work could have long-term benefits to wildlife. Spotted owl roosting/nesting sites have been found in upper Long Ravine—the remnant old growth forest. The proposed projects are designed to improve the health of this remnant forest and decrease the possibility of a destructive high-severity fire in the immediate vicinity of this habitat.

Recreation: The areas potentially affected by the proposed projects are not high-use recreation areas. They are managed by BLM under the Sierra RMP as “extended” recreation management areas, meaning that management is largely custodial. Hunting is likely the dominant type of recreation in this area. The proposed meadow and forest restoration projects could have long-term benefits to game animals like deer by increasing their forage. As understory brush continues to build up, it becomes harder for deer and other animals to forage in the forest. Burning the piles may cause temporary short-

term negative impacts to hunting, if burning is done during the fall deer hunting season. The long-term beneficial impacts of the pile burning seem to outweigh the negative impacts.

Visual resources: Under the Sierra RMP, BLM manages the area in accordance with BLM class II visual resource management (VRM) standards. None of the proposed projects would be out of line with this management policy. The proposed education path would be barely noticeable. Over the long-term, the meadow and forest restoration could improve visual resources in the immediate area. The possibility that a high-severity wildfire may occur in the area may be decreased by the fuels reduction work. The path would hardly be noticeable. Burning of the piles would have short-term negative impacts on visual quality.

Cultural/Native American concerns: The BLM archaeologist conducted a cultural resource study of the area potentially affected by the projects. The study was designed to help BLM meet its obligations under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Significant cultural resources would not be negatively affected. This includes resources to which Native Americans attach religious or cultural importance. Refer to the recommendations attached.

4.2 Impacts of the No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, YWI's proposed projects would not occur. The meadow and forest restoration work would not occur. The possibility that a high-severity wildfire may occur in the area would increase. This kind of wildfire can be highly destruction to the environment, causing harm to air quality, soils, water resources, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources. Recreation and visual resources may suffer, as well.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

The proposed projects would not have negative cumulative impacts on a watershed scale. The impacts of the proposed projects are beneficial, especially in the long term. The proposals to reduce understory brush that has built up over the years in the meadow and forest areas due to decades of fire suppression would help to reduce the possibility of a high-severity wildfire. Such a wildfire could be destructive, as pointed out previously in this EA. They are known to have negative impacts on air quality, soils, water resources, vegetation, wildlife, and cultural resources. They can also spread to negatively affect private property.

5.0 Agencies and Persons Consulted

Don Harkin, forest ecologist

5.1 BLM Interdisciplinary Team

Reviewers:

/s/ James Barnes

NEPA coordinator/cultural resources

/s/ Jeff Horn

Recreation

/s/ Albert Franklin

Botany

/s/ Peggy Cranston

Wildlife/fisheries

/s/ Brian Mulhollen

Fuels specialist

5.2 Availability of Document and Comment Procedures

This EA, posted on Mother Lode Field Office's website (www.blm.gov/ca/motherlode) under Information, NEPA (or available upon request), will be available for a 15-day public review period. Comments should be sent to the Mother Lode Field Office, 5152 Hillsdale Circle, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762 or emailed to us at jjbarnes@blm.gov.